

Studying Abroad in Japan:
A Guidebook for Preparing for and Living in Japan

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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Abstract

One of the difficulties Ball State students currently face when both preparing for and studying abroad in Japan is lack of information. When I studied in Japan from September 2017 to August 2018, lack of information was one of my main sources of stress as I tried navigating my way through potentially study-abroad-ruining experiences like applying for a student visa, paying rent, and finding medical care in Japan. The purpose of this guidebook is to combat this lack of information and aid future study abroad students with guides relevant to their future study abroad experiences in Japan.

Acknowledgements

There are several people who I would like to thank for their help in making this guidebook possible.

Dr. Sadatoshi Tomizawa – I would like to thank Dr. Tomizawa for being my advisor, my teacher, and for helping bring this guidebook to fruition.

Emma Hartman – as one of my closest friends, I could not have written this guidebook without her input and experiences.

Michelle McCarty – for providing invaluable contributions of her experiences at Sapporo University, I am deeply grateful.

Process Analysis Statement

For the majority of this project, all the guides presented here have come out of my own personal experiences or the experiences of my friends. My friends and I had plenty of frustrating experiences in Japan which I felt could have been easily avoided had more information been readily available. For that reason, I decided to record all my experiences in Japan to make this guidebook for study abroad students coming after me and leave a legacy, in a sense. Compared to other students, I went to Japan with a bit of previous experience; I was lucky enough to travel there on a school trip when I was 18 years old and be partially exposed to what living in Japan is like. When I was in the process of creating this guidebook, I realized many students were traveling to Japan for the first time in their lives, an experience which can be overwhelming if you are arriving in a new country alone and without help. Hence, I decided to choose topics which would benefit anybody who desired to study abroad in Japan, especially people going to Japan for the first time. In order to make sure my information was truthful and correct, I asked Dr. Tomizawa to be my advisor since Japan is his native country. Because of that, the information here should help future study abroad students for years to come.

Introduction

Hello, if you have opened this guidebook, then welcome! I assume you are a current Japanese language student at Ball State University who is looking to study abroad—a fine decision. I myself was once in your place looking to study abroad in Japan to improve my language skills. My study abroad experience took place from September 2017 to August 2018 at Tokyo Gakugei University, and to say it was an amazing experience is every bit an understatement. However, that's not to say there weren't some frustrating situations as well. When I chose to study abroad in Japan, one of the greatest difficulties I ran across time and time again was lack of information. Important tasks like applying for a visa, exchanging money, and finding medical services in Japan were among the myriad of things I didn't know. Other study abroad students from Ball State also expressed similar difficulties. My hope is that this guidebook can help remedy some of these situations you may run across in Japan. Moreover, I want to help ensure that going to Japan is an all-around enjoyable process. You will meet new people, encounter a completely different culture, and speak an entirely different language all while learning to live in Japan. Living in a new country different than your own will challenge you personally and change your perspective of the world around you—an experience which is invaluable and irreplaceable. With that, I hope this guidebook will be of great use as you study abroad in Japan.

Section 1: Planning and Preparation

Choosing to study abroad in Japan is an easy choice, but the planning and preparation needed beforehand is essential to successfully (both academically and financially) study abroad in Japan. Consider the following sections to help answer whether or not you will be able to have a successful study abroad.

1.1 What school year should you choose to study abroad?

To begin, choosing which school year to spend in Japan is the best place to start. But which year is best; sophomore, junior, or senior year? Ultimately, deciding what school year is best to study abroad will come down to your personal desire, academic needs, and your financial circumstances.

a. Sophomore Year:

Although this is fairly early to do study abroad, it's still possible to do so as a sophomore. However, I would only recommend going as a sophomore if your Japanese level is highly advanced (ie, above Ball State's 300 level or at 400 level classes) and are financially able to do so. Although your Japanese skills will greatly improve, in my opinion, to gain the most from your Japanese studies during your experience, I would recommend you finish Ball State's higher-level Japanese courses before seriously considering studying abroad. Furthermore, waiting until a later year could also allow you to arrange and stabilize your finances. When I studied abroad, I met only a handful of sophomores, they were studying abroad, nonetheless. In my experience, I found most sophomores consistently placed in the lower level Japanese classes and did not gain nearly as much knowledge in the

Japanese language compared to other students. This is not to disparage those students in any way, but I believe they could have gained much, much more had they waited and learned more Japanese before studying abroad.

b. Junior Year:

Studying abroad your junior year is probably most optimal, the reasons being that you can avoid difficulties with academics and your graduation date. At this point, your Japanese should be fairly advanced, and you stand to gain much more knowledge with your language skills. Also, if you plan carefully, funding your study abroad will be much easier given that you'll have a longer period of time to save money.

c. Senior Year:

Waiting until your senior year to study abroad can be beneficial in a few ways. At this point, you will most likely have finished the majority of the Japanese language courses at Ball State and you should be close to graduating. Studying in Japan will not only solidify the materials you learned in Ball State's Japanese classes but will also give you the chance to continue your studies in more advanced Japanese. Also, with a few years of savings behind you, you have a better chance of being financially stable. However, there are a few other points that should be considered. If you are looking into doing a full-year program in Japan, you cannot graduate from Ball State until the following December. Furthermore, you should also carefully follow your academic credits to ensure that you will be able to graduate after your study abroad in Japan.

d. Remarks

As a side note, I understand the strong desire to study in Japan. I also wanted to go as soon as I possibly could; the thought is tempting. Again, I'd suggest for you to wait until your junior or senior year to study abroad. Personally, I found it much more rewarding to wait until my senior year to study in Japan. I had learned as much as I could from Ball State's Japanese program and had I gone earlier, I believe I would have hindered myself. In other words, don't let your personal desire to go to Japan influence your decision making. It is better to go to Japan when you have developed as a Japanese language student, not before.

1.2 Will you be up to the difficulties of living in Japan

Again, choosing to study abroad is an easy decision, but finally arriving and living on your own in Japan for an extended period is quite a different matter. You will face challenges everyday—whether that involves communicating in Japanese, adapting to a new environment, or simply relearning how to function day-to-day, these challenges need to be considered.

One of the most important topics when discussing the difficulties of living abroad is culture shock. No matter how prepared you may think you are, culture shock will affect you at some point. Being completely submersed in another culture with a completely different language will challenge you mentally. How you respond to culture shock will ultimately determine whether you can live and thrive in Japan.

Also, you will have to become used to the idea of living independently. You will have to take care of your own matters, such as money or health related matters—in Japanese. These are

all matters which with you will have to face on a daily basis, so you are the judge as to whether or not you can survive in Japan.

1.3 Choosing a Program

As of 2018, Ball State University has three Japanese sister schools which send exchange students every year. These two schools are Tokyo Gakugei University, Akita International University, and Sapporo University.

- a. Tokyo Gakugei University: Located in Koganei City west of the Tokyo metropolis, Tokyo Gakugei University is a national university which offers both a full year program as well as a single semester program in the spring.
- b. Akita International University: Located in Akita City in bucolic Akita Prefecture, Akita International University is a public university which offers a full year program. Compared to the other two programs listed, not as many people elect to attend AIU, so talk to Dr. Tomizawa for more details about when to apply.
- c. Sapporo University: Located in the capital city of Hokkaido, Sapporo University is a private university which offers programs during the summer and fall semesters. However, note the programs are the same for both semesters, contentwise.

Timeline for Applying

1. Tokyo Gakugei University

Applying to study at Tokyo Gakugei University begins in January prior to the year you desire to study abroad. At this time, you will fill out two applications—one for Ball State's Rinker Center and another which will be mailed directly to Tokyo Gakugei. The application deadline for the Rinker Center is at the end of February. For Tokyo Gakugei, the application deadline is April 1st. Talk to Dr. Tomizawa for more information.

2. Sapporo University

Applications for Sapporo University around the end of October or the beginning of November for studying abroad over the summer semester. The deadline for this is around mid-December before Christmas break. You will also have to fill in the application for the Rinker Center. Talk to Dr. Tomizawa for more information.

Financing – Can you Afford to go to Japan

Financing is one of the most difficult questions to answer simply because it varies from program to program, not to mention daily living expenses also must be factored. One of the requirements for successfully applying for student visa requires that you have access to an account with at least ¥1,000,000 (approximately \$10,000 USD) deposited. However, this \$10,000 should be regarded as a bare minimum; the cost of living in Japan can be quite expensive.

Your first month in Japan will most likely be the most expensive as well. Since you will be starting from square one in Japan, you'll have to buy many basic necessities to furnish your

living space, like laundry and cleaning supplies, bed sheets, etc. Furthermore, you will also have to pay for rent and buy insurance. I myself spent over \$1,500 within the first month to pay for rent, buy insurance, get a bicycle, and travel to my school. Students who went to Sapporo University said that most of them paid their rent fee up front for the entire semester, which costed them around \$1,100. However, both Tokyo Gakugei University and Sapporo University are going through some changes with their international housing situations, so rent fees may be higher in the future.

Overall, my liberal estimate for spending would be between \$800 and \$1000 per month, including rent, travel fees, and food (not including the initial month). Though my estimate is liberal, please plan accordingly and be sure to have extra money in case of emergencies. But, do expect to spend \$10,000 or more on your study abroad.

Section 2: Prior to Leaving for Japan

At this point, you will have already chosen and applied to your desired program. Congratulations! Now, on to final preparations before you leave for Japan.

2.1 Applying for a Visa

Without a visa, your trip to Japan will be over before it begins. Hence, you will need to apply for a student visa which will allow you study in Japan. Fortunately, Tokyo Gakugei University and Sapporo University help students apply for visas on the Japanese side of the matter. However, you will also have to do some work yourself to get your visa approved on the U.S. side of the matter.

- a. For the Japanese side of things, you will have to do at least two things. First, you will have to fill out a personal information questionnaire for your visa application. These are fairly straightforward and shouldn't be too difficult to fill out. The second part of the application can be more difficult, however. As part of the application, you also must provide evidence that you can support yourself financially in Japan. As stated before, the visa application requires you to show a current bank account record with the equivalent of ¥1,000,000 (approximately \$10,000 USD as of 2018) deposited. After doing that, all you have to do is wait for the visa application to be approved and sent to you.

Note: You will receive your certificate of eligibility after everything has been completed on the Japanese side of the application. Generally, these are mailed to Dr. Tomizawa, so plan on receiving them from him.

- b. For the American side of things, you will have to do more legwork. Again, you will have to fill out another application for the Japanese Consulate-General. For Indiana residents, the Midwest Consulate-General is in Chicago. For residents from other states, this could differ, so please determine the Japanese Consulate-General jurisdiction for your state. The link below provides a checklist of all the items necessary for applying for a student visa.

<https://www.chicago.us.emb-japan.go.jp/Consular/visa/requirements/coe.pdf>

Visa applications generally take one business week to be processed, and this excludes the amount of time it spends in the mail. When applying for the visa, be careful to see how much time left you have before leaving for Japan. When I received my

certificate of eligibility, I was only two weeks away from leaving for Japan. To make sure I had my visa finished in time, I drove up to the Japanese Consulate in Chicago to avoid having to mail my application and take extra time. Once my visa was finished, I drove back to Chicago again to get it as quickly as possible.

2.2 Getting Plane Tickets

Once your application has been sent to your respective school, one of the next major tasks is determining a plan to get to Japan. As soon as you have finished your application to your chosen university, start looking for plane tickets. The sooner you start looking, the better—do not leave this task for the last minute! Most of the time, plane tickets are much cheaper if you plan a few months in advance. You can end up saving hundreds of dollars if you plan accordingly. For those going to Tokyo Gakugei University, I would recommend looking for plane tickets as soon as you finish your application around April 1st. For Sapporo University students, I would recommend looking for plane tickets in December after finishing your application.

Once you get your plane tickets, don't forget to inform the Rinker Center of your travel plans on their study abroad application. If you only have tickets one-way, then you can inform the Rinker Center of your return plans at a later date. After that, your travel plans should be set.

One thing to note, make sure to check the status of your plane. Approximately a week before I left, my flight was cancelled due to effects of Hurricane Harvey. Because of that, I left a day later than I originally intended. So, keep up to date on your plane tickets so you don't have any surprises before you leave for your study abroad.

2.3 Setting Up Finances

Even in today's modern world, Japan is still very much a cash-driven society. That being said, monetary matters in Japan can be a headache if you don't properly plan.

1. Credit and Debit Cards

Before you leave for Japan, you will need to call your credit/debit card provider and inform them you will be using your cards in Japan for the length of your study abroad. If you attempt to use your cards without notifying your provider first, they will freeze your accounts. Until you contact your provider, you will not be able to access your money.

2. Exchanging Money

Since the majority of Japan still relies on physical money, exchanging your dollars for yen before leaving is highly recommended. Not all places accept credit and debit cards, so it's best to carry money on your person in case of emergencies.

2.4 Items to Consider Taking

Contrary to what the title of this section says, I'd advise you to only bring the bare necessities. Consider even packing in a way that would allow you to bring an empty or nearly empty suitcase. Because you will be in Japan, you will want to bring home keepsakes, souvenirs, and other items which will remind you of your time in Japan. But, there are a few things I would advise you to bring.

1. Comfortable shoes— You will be walking nearly everywhere in Japan. Although there are trains, buses, and subways that can easily get you from one place to another, you will still have to walk a fair distance to access them. I'd even recommend

bringing a few pairs of shoes with you, you may blow out a pair or two while you are there. Of course, there are also shoe stores in Japan which contain many brands you may be familiar with, but whether you bring your shoes or purchase them in Japan is up to your discretion.

2. Toiletries— You might be surprised to find that Japan is lacking in what we consider normal toiletries, such as deodorant. Although it's quite easy to find things such as shampoo and conditioner, it may be difficult to find other toiletries you're accustomed to in the U.S. So, if there is a certain brand of soap or deodorant which you prefer, I'd recommend bringing along a couple.

2.5 Leaving for Japan

One last thing I'd like to impress before you get on your plane to fly to Japan. When you step off the plane after you land in Japan, you represent Ball State University. Your actions not only reflect your own personality, character, and values, but also that of a student from Ball State University. You are one of the links which keep the exchange programs between our sister schools alive, so always be aware of your actions so that future students can enjoy the same experiences you will have. I sincerely hope that you have a wonderful time in Japan!

Section 3: Arrival in Japan

Congratulations, you've arrived in Japan! Now to get to your respective university and get settled into your study abroad experience.

3.1 Getting to your Dorm/University

Our sister schools are quite good at coordinating how to get to your school. For students going to Tokyo Gakugei, you will be emailed instructions on how to get to the Hitotsubashi International Student Dorm and when you need to arrive in Japan. Generally, Hitotsubashi arranges for a bus to pick up students at Narita Airport and transport them to the International Student Dorm. Though, you will have to pay around a \$40 fee to ride the bus. For students going to Sapporo University, you should also receive instructions via email and will either be picked up by one of the university's teachers or by taxi at New Chitose Airport. Those who go by taxi will have to pay for said taxi, but will be refunded by Sapporo University.

3.2 University Orientation

During the first few weeks in Japan, you will likely have to attend a student orientation at your school. In some cases, you may also have to attend orientation at your dorm as well, which is true in the case for Gakugei exchange students at Hitotsubashi International Student Dorm. This is a good opportunity to meet other students who are studying abroad like you are and make connections. As all orientations go, you will be introduced to your respective campus and some the students who go there. In some cases, such as mine, you will be required to go through a medical exam, signing up for a bank account, and buying fire insurance. So, you should expect to go through some of those things.

3.3 Placement Exams

At your chosen university, you will normally have to take a placement exam to test into certain levels of Japanese language classes. You shouldn't worry about these tests, they are only

meant to assess your current language level and nothing more. Though, that doesn't mean you shouldn't take them seriously. Get a full night of sleep before the test and do your best!

Placement exams can affect which classes you will be able to take, so you only hurt yourself if you do less than your very best.

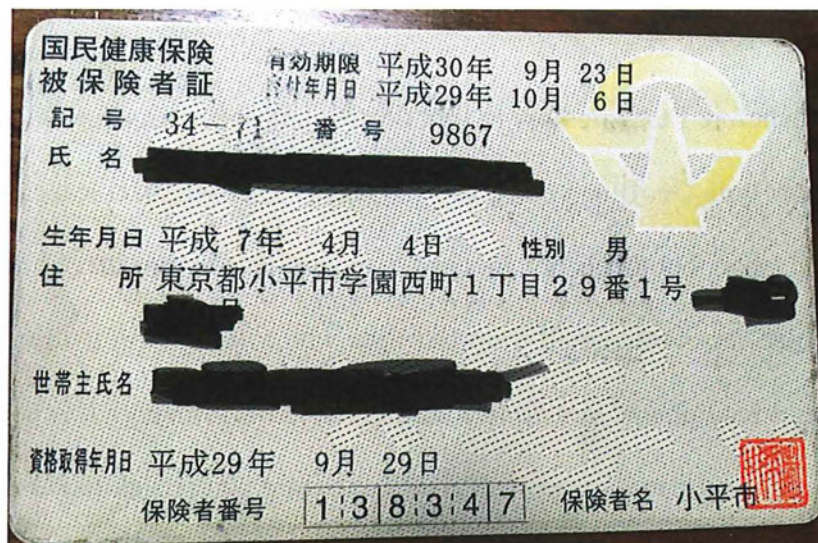
Section 4: Healthcare

Being sick in Japan can be a frightening and stressful experience. The language barrier alone is hard enough, but also trying to find a doctor or specialist adds another layer of difficulty to the process. However, you do have multiple choices when it comes to finding healthcare in Japan.

4.1 The Japanese Health Insurance System

a. Entering and Paying into Japan's Health Insurance System

While you are in Japan, in order to use Japanese health insurance, you will have to pay into the system. Normally, you will be mailed letters which will contain insurance bills which will allow you to join the system after you have paid the bill. These bills have barcodes on them and can be paid at your local convenience store. Take the bill to one of the clerks and ask them to scan the bar code and then you can pay right there. Later on, you should receive in the mail a letter which contains a card certifying that you are a part of the Japanese Health Insurance system. Do not throw away this card! This is your validation that you have insurance and must be presented at clinics in order to receive its benefits. Having this card will allow you to pay only 20% of your doctor's fee. Without it, you will have to pay the full price. Your card should look similar to this:



In the blacked-out areas, your full name should appear.

b. Finding Doctors and Specialists

Before you begin searching for a doctor, I would suggest going to your school's health center first. Since you are a student, you should be able to use the clinic for free.

However, there are some cases which cannot be treated at the health clinic. For example, one of my friends contracted strep throat, so we went to Tokyo Gakugei's health center to see if we could get treatment. Unfortunately, getting it treated there was an impossibility.

At this point, you can ask the staff to help find doctors that would be able to treat you.

However, be aware that these will be Japanese doctors and you will have to use your Japanese to be able to get treated—a daunting task. In some cases, some clinics will refuse service to you if you are not fluent in Japanese or have not brought along a translator to help you. I would recommend bringing along a Japanese friend or a friend who is fluent in Japanese to aid you in the Japanese health clinics.

4.2 GeoBlue

A very important note before I explain how to find doctors and specialists through GeoBlue—you need to register with GeoBlue before you can use it! You will receive a card in the mail before you leave for Japan, but this is not enough! You will have to register online as well. At some point, you should receive an email from GeoBlue which will give you directions on how to register with them. I recommend you do this before you leave. Although it is possible to register much later, it's much easier to register with GeoBlue before you're sick rather than after you've become sick.

a. How to use GeoBlue

To find doctors and specialists with GeoBlue, you will have to use their website to locate them. First, log in to your student account and go to the main members hub, shown here below.

The screenshot shows the GeoBlue member hub for Adam Linscott. The header includes the GeoBlue logo and navigation links: Member Hub, Destination Dashboard, Tools & Services, and Claims. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- My Plan:** Displays member information for Adam Linscott (501436506), including address (PO Box 326, Pittsboro, Indiana 46167) and email (adlinscott@bsu.edu). It also provides links for Coverage & Benefits, Enrollment Details, and Member Guide PDF.
- My Claims:** Shows a progress bar for claims with four stages: Received (0), Processing Claim (0), Processing Payment (0), and Complete (0). It includes buttons for View My Claims, How to File a Claim, and File an eClaim. A note states: "My Claims shows claims submitted in the last 90 days."
- My Health Tools:** Offers links for Medicare Equivalents, Translate Medical Terms, and Translate Medical Phrases.
- Contact Customer Service:** Provides phone numbers: +1.644.265.2606 (toll-free from the U.S.) and +1.610.353.2547 (collect, if outside the U.S.), along with a Contact Customer Service button.
- Get Care:** Includes a Provider Finder section with a link to International Provider Finder, buttons for Start a New Direct Pay Request and View All Issued GOs, and a Service Requests section with a Submit a Service Request button.
- My Destination:** Features a map and links for Explore Your Destination and News & Society.

The footer of the page includes the GeoBlue Mobile App download link with the text "Global. Local. Mobile." and a Learn More button.

Under “Provider Finder,” select the “International Provider Finder” button. This should bring you to the following page.

Here, fill out the information accordingly. As an example, I’ve decided to use Tokyo. After you fill in the country and city boxes, you will be able to choose a specialty, i.e. dentistry, physical therapy, dermatology, mental health, among others. I’ve chosen dentistry, again for the sake of example. You will then be able to see a list of doctors from the specialty that you’ve chosen, like so.

Here, you can choose which doctor fits your needs best (I've blocked out their names in this case to protect their privacy). Also, all doctors listed in GeoBlue speak English, so you shouldn't have to worry about bringing along a friend or translator. Once you've decided on a doctor, set up an appointment by contacting their offices. After you've set up an appointment, you will also need to setup direct pay so that GeoBlue will cover your expenses. As you can see in the previous picture, you can click "Request Direct Pay" under your doctor of choice. You can also do this while viewing your preferred doctor's profile as well. Once you click that button, you should be brought to this next page.

GeoBlue
International Health Insurance for Higher Education

Member Hub - Destination Dashboard Tools & Services - Claims -

Adam Linscott

Direct Pay Request

1 - Provider 2 - Type 3 - Patient 4 - Service 5 - Appointment 6 - Review 7 - Confirmation


Request Type

Have you previously contacted us about this symptom or condition?

☐ Yes, I have previously contacted GeoBlue for assistance with this condition.

☐ No, this is a new request.

Summary



Change Provider

Here, you will be prompted to fill in details such as your appointment and what type of service you are receiving. Once you fill in these details, your request for direct pay will be submitted to GeoBlue for review and approval. You should receive emails with the status of your Direct Pay approval. After that, you should be good to go to your doctor's appointment.

Note: Be sure to set up Direct Pay at least two days prior to your appointment, otherwise you will have to pay for fees out of pocket!

Section 5: Banking

Banking in Japan can be especially difficult simply because of the language and vocabulary involved. For Sapporo University students, you most likely will not need to open a bank account for the duration of your stay and probably won't have to do much in the way of banking. Tokyo Gakugei students, on the other hand, will fill out bank account application forms during your orientation before classes start as that will be one of your methods to pay your rent.

5.1 Paying Rent

Paying rent was honestly one of the biggest headaches about living in Japan for me. For Tokyo Gakugei students, you will create bank accounts and sign forms allowing for Hitotsubashi International Student Dorm to automatically withdraw rent fees from your account each month. I recommend that you stay aware of how much money you have in that account and have enough money in there to consistently make rent. I made the mistake of miscalculating how much money I needed to pay for rent near the end of the year and put unnecessary stress on myself by trying to catch up on my payments. That being said, if you fall behind on rent, you will receive a bank slip with the amount that you need pay. I would recommend trying to either pay directly or going to the bank who provided the bank slip and asking the staff for help. Otherwise, stay aware of the amount of money you have in your bank account!

Side Note: I found most banks in Japan closed at 3 p.m. on business days. Their times tend to be pretty inconvenient, especially for students.

5.2 Exchanging Money

If you are like me, I had difficulties getting my money changed from dollars to yen before I left for Japan. Because of that, I brought money along with me to exchange once I arrived. However, finding good services to exchange money can be difficult, but two good options do exist.

a. Travelex

Travelex is one of the easiest places to get your money exchanged into yen. It's fast, doesn't require you to fill out forms, and most of the time the tellers can also speak English. However, there's one big drawback—they tend to be very few and often only in large cities. Once you're outside of those large cities, you're not likely to find any. But, if you're fortunate to find one you can use consistently without having to travel far, I would definitely recommend using Travelex for your needs.

b. JP Post

The other reliable money exchange service I found and is much more common is JP Post. This method of exchange can be a little bit more difficult as you will have to tell the staff that you want to exchange money as well as fill out a form to do so. On said form, you will have to fill in your address, the amount of money you are exchanging, and what type of money you are exchanging. You will also likely have to spend some time waiting for your dollars to be converted to yen. Although this process isn't too difficult, it tends to be more time consuming. But, if you're like me, this was the easiest and most convenient choice.

One thing to note, you will also have to find a JP Post office which handles money exchanges as not every one of them offers this service. Use the search engine I've provided in the link below to help find different locations:

<https://global.map.japanpost.jp/p/en/search/>

Once you have selected your area, you will see JP Post locations marked by red or green squares. Green usually denotes ATMs whereas red generally denotes JP Post offices. You will want to search through the red squares to find an office which offers exchange services because not all of them do.



Here, I've selected a branch office which offers money exchange services. When looking through your options, make sure that the office of your choice has the little green symbol on the far right. If your selected office has that symbol, then it offers money exchange services.

5.3 Using Credit/Debit Cards

Although you can't use a credit and debit cards often in stores, you can use them with ATMs. And, all ATMs come with an English option to make using them easier. I found using a credit and debit cards to be the easiest method of getting cash, though you will have to pay fees

when you use them to withdraw money from an ATM. However, you will need to find an ATM which accepts international cards, there are some ATMs which will only accept Japanese cards. If you have a PIN, you will also need to keep that memorized to access your funds. Again, make sure you have contacted your credit and/or debit card provider beforehand to let them know you will be using your cards in Japan, otherwise your accounts will be frozen.

Section 6: Transportation

Compared to the rest of the developed world, Japan's transportation is one of the best in my opinion. With Japan's bus and train network alone will get you almost anywhere you need to go, and added options such as flying or using the bullet train make Japan's transportation system even more flexible.

6.1 How to Get a Bicycle

In many cases, using a bicycle is one of the cheapest means to get around. However, Japan is much stricter than the U.S. about the purchasing and selling of bicycles. Buying a bicycle is rather simple, but difficulties can arise in registering your bicycle. In Japan, all bikes must be registered with the police, and normally there is a registration form that bike shops or your local police box will provide. In order to fill out a bike registration form, you will need to know your address. Sapporo University students found they didn't need bicycles to get around as their living arrangements were about a five-minute walk from Sapporo University's campus. However, as a Tokyo Gakugei student, I used my bike nearly every day (weather permitting) as walking to campus was nearly a 35-minute commute. Depending on your situation, it's up to your discretion whether to purchase a bicycle or not.

Also, after you purchase your bicycle, you will generally also need to register your bicycle with both your school and dorm as well that way they don't ticket and/or remove your bike.

6.2 Using Japan's Transportation System

Japan's public transportation system is quite remarkable and should be one of the envies of the developed world. Nearly any place you go in Japan, you will have the options of being able to use a train, subway, bus, shinkansen, or airplane for your traveling needs. Though, there are nuances to each system and can sometimes be tricky to use.

One of the first things you'll want to get when you arrive in Japan is a Suica/Icoca/Sapica card (the cards differ depending on region—Suica is used in the Kantou region, Icoca the Kansai region, and Sapica in Hokkaido. For simplicity's sake, I will refer to them from here as Suica cards). These cards are highly useful as they are quick and convenient for going through ticket gates and you don't have to mess around with buying a ticket. However, you should also know that some local and rural lines do not provide support for subway cards. In this case, you will have to buy normal tickets.

a. Buses

The bus systems in Japan can wildly differ, or rather the buses themselves differ greatly, even within the same city.

Flat Rate – This is one of the most convenient systems in all of Japan, in my opinion.

With buses that charge flat rate fares, all you need to pay is a single charge to ride. You can then you can ride the bus however far it goes without racking up extra charges. These

tend to be popular in cities that lack other modes of transportation, like extensive subway systems. Kyoto would be a good example of a city with a bus system that uses a flat rate system as there aren't many subway lines which run throughout the city.

Non-flat Rate – I personally never encountered any of these systems as I didn't venture outside the flat rate zones. These buses tend to be in more rural areas, so expect to pay cash when using them. From what I have been told by friends, you generally will get a numbered ticket when you enter the bus and will pay once you've reached your stop. How much you pay, of course, will depend on how far you go. In some cases, you may even have to tell the bus driver where you need to go.

Most major bus systems within large cities tend to have similar buses. In most cases, buses are boarded using the back door while the front door is used as the exit. On the next page is an example¹ of a rear entry bus:

¹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Entetsu_omnibus.jpg



For comparison, a photo² of a front entry bus:



² <http://justacarguy.blogspot.com/2018/05/bus-drivers-in-japanese-city-of-okayama.html>

As you can see in both photos, the entrances and exits for each type of bus is generally labeled, so you shouldn't have much trouble distinguishing where to get on and off the bus.

Riding a bus for the first time can be confusing, but if you plan ahead and take your time figuring out your route, you should have no problems after your initial ride.

Generally, what you will do is look for where the closest bus stop is to your desired



location to determine both the stop and bus line. Again, I'd recommend looking up routes beforehand, all of which can easily be found on the internet. Once you find your desired bus line, board at one of the stations or stops it serves.

When you need to get off at your stop, you will press a small button (as you can see in the photo³) indicating that you want to stop at the next station. Station names are

displayed at the front of the bus, so pay attention so you don't miss your stop. Also, the station names are presented in English as well, so you don't have to worry about trying to translate station names on the fly.

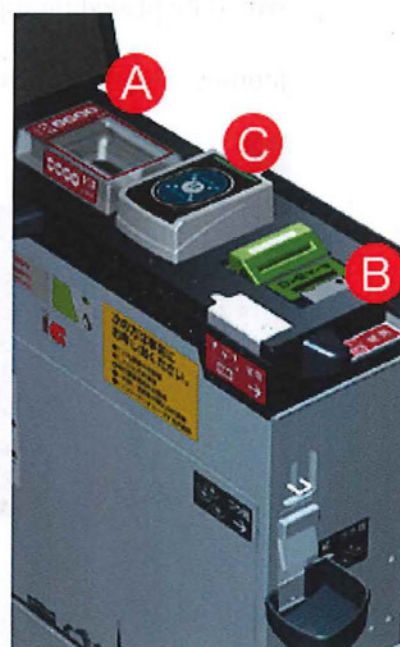
One thing I always found confusing when I started riding on the buses at first was the method of payment. Most buses allow you to pay with your Suica card, but others require you to pay with cash. For Suica cards, payment is simple. Once you get on the bus, there should be a Suica card reader near the door where you can press your card. However, some buses are not consistent and only have them located in front near the driver. Or, in most cases there is a Suica card reader in both the front and back! Generally, you will

³ http://farm5.static.flickr.com/4102/4786783535_b084a77083_m.jpg

only need swipe your Suica card once to pay for the ride, so using either the reader located in the front or back is fine.

However, there are some bus lines which do not use Suica cards for payment. In this case, you will have to make a cash payment, and normally they ask for exact change payments. Now, what if you don't have exact change? Luckily, the bus lines have that taken care of for you. At the front of the bus next to the driver, there will be a till where you can both pay your bus fee as well as break down bills and coins to smaller amounts.

At the location marked B in the picture⁴ here, there will be generally be both a slot for coins and bills. You will insert either your coin or bill into their respective slots and get change below. However, you still need to pay the bus fee. From your broken-down change, count out the exact amount for your bus fee, then place it in the small box marked by the letter A. (Just for thoroughness, letter C denotes a Suica card reader).



Although riding the bus seems like a complicated process, once you have ridden them once or twice you should be able to navigate them easily with no stress.

b. Subways and Train Lines

Getting around Japan on the trains is quite easy, once you've used the system a few times. But before you use the train and subways lines, one of the first things I'd

⁴ https://www.kotsu.metro.tokyo.jp/bus/routes/sp/assets/img/pg_howto/img04.png

recommend is to download the Travel Japan app on your phone. By doing so, you can use the app to easily help you find multiple train routes to different stations. Another thing I would recommend every time before you use the train is to map out your trip so you will at least have a road map for where you need to go. That, and it may help prevent you from getting lost.

Payment is simple with the major lines, all you need to do is swipe you Suica card at one of the gates to gain access to the trains. In the picture⁵ below, your Suica card would be placed on top of the illuminated blue reader. Once you've finished your journey, swipe again at the exit gates to leave.



In some cases, some train lines will not accept Suica cards for payment. In this situation, you will most likely have to buy a ticket to ride the line. Normally, you will buy these tickets at ticket dispensers and then enter the gate by feeding the ticket into

⁵ http://resizeme.club/picresize-351_14.html

a ticket slot. In the picture above, the ticket slot is below the Suica card reader and is surrounded by a yellow line. Once you have fed the ticket through the machine, be sure to pick it up at the other end of the gate as you will need to use it when you exit the line as well.

c. Shinkansen/Bullet Train

The Shinkansen truly is a marvel of modern Japan. However, using it can be confusing at times as the Shinkansen are divided into two major areas of operation—JR West and JR East. With Tokyo Station being the central hub, JR West serves major cities west of Tokyo in the Kansai Region, and JR East serves major cities east of Tokyo in the Kantou Region.

There are a few different ways you can buy tickets for the Shinkansen. In major stations, there are specially

marked ticket dispensers that sell only Shinkansen tickets, like in this photo⁶. Tickets can also be

bought at Midori-no-madoguchi Ticket Office, but you will have to



be able to converse completely in Japanese in order to purchase your tickets. JR East actually has an online ticket reservation site, which I found to be very convenient when I used it. It allows you to make your purchase from home, but you do have to select a major station to go and pick up your tickets. JR West, however, does not have

⁶ <https://resources.matcha-jp.com/resize/720x2000/2018/06/22-56951.jpeg>

an online reservation site that I could find. As a side note, I do not recommend trying to buy Shinkansen tickets on the day you plan to ride the Shinkansen. When I bought my reserved tickets, I also couldn't pick them up the same day as my departure; I had to get them earlier. Like any type of travel in Japan, plan, plan, plan in advance and get your tickets early.

Buying tickets for the Shinkansen can also be slightly confusing. In order to ride the Shinkansen, you will need to purchase a general fare ticket. To ride in Green Cars or GranClass, you will not only have to buy a Green Car or GranClass tickets, but also a general fare ticket as well. When I rode the Shinkansen, I made the mistake of thinking that I only needed to buy a Green Car ticket in order to board the train. I ended up paying around \$500 for a round-trip because I had to pay for both the general fare and Green Car ticket, otherwise my trip would have been closer to \$250.

If you are boarding the Shinkansen at Tokyo Station, then I'd advise you to memorize which line you are riding. Because Tokyo Station is the central hub for Shinkansen, this is where both JR East and JR West meet. Because of that, finding your train can be confusing. For example, see the picture⁷ below.

⁷ https://i1.wp.com/shiga-kogenguide.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/IMG_1202.jpg?resize=1024%2C768



In order to keep JR West and JR East separate, there are two different gates to access the platforms for JR West trains and JR East trains. Hence, memorizing the name of your train and the major line is highly important! Once you get to your gate, you will take your boarding pass and feed it into the ticket gate to gain access to Shinkansen platforms. Also, after you feed your ticket through the gate, make sure to pick up your ticket again as you will need it once you get off the Shinkansen.

d. Flying

Flying around Japan is almost completely similar to flying around in the U.S. You can buy and reserve tickets online and print them at the airport. Luckily, most airport staff are also fluent in English, so if you have any trouble, always remember that you

can speak to somebody in English. Otherwise, there really are no differences in flying in Japan and flying in the U.S.

e. Remarks

If you plan on travelling around Japan, I suggest you make plans well in advance. Two times of the year I would recommend planning for months in advance is during New Years and Golden Week (that is if you plan on travelling during those times). Because New Years and Golden Week are holidays for all Japanese people, every mode of transportation is completely crowded with travelers. Finding tickets and making reservations during this time can not only be expensive but also quite difficult even if you manage to find tickets. When I went to Japan, my older sister was stationed up at the U.S. Air Base in Misawa, and I decided to visit her during New Years. I had wanted to ride the Shinkansen, but all the reservations were sold out. I was lucky enough to find airplane tickets about a month prior, but the tickets were nearly \$400 round-trip. Had I planned in advance, I could have paid \$200 for those tickets. So, learn from my mistake and plan in advance!

Section 7: Tips for Making Friends

7.1 Extracurriculars

If your school or dorm hosts events for the students, I'd highly recommend going. It's a good way to get connected with people, you're likely to meet both other international students as well as Japanese students. Also, your school or dorm may also organize trips from time to time. Generally you do have to pay for these kinds of trips, but the trips are much cheaper than if you

were to do it by yourself. And again, these trips allow you to meet up with other people, both international students and Japanese students.

7.2 Joining School Clubs/Circles

Generally, universities provide information about the clubs and circles which take place at school. This can include booklets, websites, or in some cases, both. At any rate, when you find a club or circle (or multiple clubs and circles) that you want to become a part of, you should email the club leader (部長). Generally you can find their name and email address within the club/circle booklets. Below is an example of an email you can send to introduce yourself and ask if you can join their club.

はじめまして、〇〇さん。(Club Leader's Last Name)
 私はアメリカからの留学生の〇〇と申します。(Your Name)
 〇〇クラブに興味があります。(Club or Circle Name)
 一回クラブを見てみたいです。
 どうすればいいですか？

〇〇 〇〇 (Your name)
 〇〇大学 (Your University)
 日本語研究

You can use this email as a template, though be sure to change the circles to your needs. A fair warning though, at this point everything will be in Japanese (unless maybe you're joining an English club). This is not meant to intimidate or scare you away from joining a club, but you will now have to put your Japanese skills to use. Luckily, Japanese people are aware that learning and using their native language is difficult, so Japanese people are quite forgiving if you make mistakes and have difficulties communicating. After emailing the club leader, they will most likely invite you to meet with them and then meet the club.

One question which continually crops up from Ball State Japanese students is, “Do I have to use Keigo when I join a club?” The answer to that depends on the club; some are stricter than others. For example, a karate, kendo, or judo club have more structured hierarchy, and therefore may require using Keigo. Most other clubs and circles are generally more relaxed. Groups and circles are closer to a large group of friends hanging out, so it’s not quite rigid and structured as you may think. When you join the club for the first time, always try to use です・ます form when meeting and talking to other club members. As time goes on, you can start slipping more into using casual form, especially when you’ve made some friends. In fact, you may even find your friends telling you to use casual form from the beginning.

In my experience, I joined Tokyo Gakugei’s Jazz Club. Every week we had session on Saturdays lasting a few hours, and normally during the week we would hang out with each other in our club room. When I joined the Jazz Club, I had difficulty speaking and talking with the members at first, but all of them were very kind and helped me as much as they could. Eventually, my conversation skills greatly improved, and I was a valued member of the Jazz Club.

At any rate, joining a club should be a fun experience for you. If you find you don’t enjoy a club or aren’t having a good time, you do have the decision to leave. Otherwise, I hope you find a club or circle which you enjoy being a part of.

7.3 How to Try Making Japanese Friends

Making Japanese friends can be difficult, especially if you don’t know any of the previous exchange students or anybody at your school. Since you may not be taking classes with Japanese students and interacting with them on a consistent basis, you may find making Japanese

friends to be difficult. Japanese people are often reserved, so most wouldn't go out of their way to make conversation. This can be even harder if you have difficulty speaking Japanese as well. However, I urge you to continually keep trying to make conversation with other Japanese people. They are generally kind and will try to help you with your speaking as much as possible, even if you do have trouble speaking.

Joining a club or circle is an easy way to be able to interact with Japanese students. Because you already share a common interest with the students in the club, you can more easily start conversations and make friends. Note, however, that it may take time for you to be completely accepted into a club. Again, Japanese people can be very reserved, so it may take time for them to completely warm up to talking and interacting with a foreign student. However, if you continually show interest in the club, participate in activities, and try talking to people, then you will become an important member, too.

Another place you can search for Japanese friends is your university's English program. If you can imagine, finding people who can fluently speak, read, and write English can be difficult in Japan. As a native speaker of English, you can use this ability to your advantage. By seeking out your university's English program, you can find students who may be looking to practice and improve their English skills. Conversely, you may also be able to practice your Japanese skills with these students. And in some cases, they can be quite helpful in explaining any difficulties you may have in Japanese to you in English.

One word of warning I feel I should also include—like in the U.S., there are also unsavory characters in Japan as well. Although Japan is a much safer country compared to others, that does not necessarily mean there are no criminals or bad people; maybe less, but certainly not non-existent. When I visited Japan, I knew of a few girls who were sexually

harassed by male students, so by no means is Japan free of bad characters. This is up to your discretion—you are able to choose which people you do and do not want to be around with. And, it is always possible for friendships to turn sour. I've heard many stories of students being used simply for English practice under the pretense of being friends. Again, who you determine are your friends is up to your discretion, and I sincerely hope this does not happen to you. At the very least, I'd advise to use caution.

Section 8: Tips for Living in Japan

1. Memorize your address! There are many forms in Japan which require your address, such as bicycle registration, money exchange, etc., so the sooner you memorize your address, the better. Or, take a picture with your phone and carry it on you for reference.
2. When you have some business you have to attend to, try to imagine and script out conversations beforehand. Ask yourself, what do I need to say? Do I know how to say this in Japanese? What vocabulary might I need? Keep a running script in your head for what kinds of questions and topics you could possibly be talking about. By doing so, you can prepare yourself in a way for important conversations.
3. Knowing some common etiquette before going to Japan will help prevent some awkward situations. So, here's a small list.
 - a. Do not eat or drink on trains or any form of public transportation.
 - b. Do not make phone calls while on public transportation. Using your cell phone is fine, but please do so quietly with your phone in silent mode.
 - c. When you carry a backpack onto a train or a bus, remove it from your back and carry it in your hand or in front of you.

- d. Japanese people are much more quiet compared to Americans in public, so try not to be too loud in public—especially on public transportation.
- e. This one is probably fairly obvious, but take your shoes off when you're going into somebody's home, onto tatami mats, or where it would seem reasonable to do so.
- f. When eating at a restaurant, do not give a tip—receiving tips is not normal they won't be received well. Instead, thank the staff by saying 「ごちそうさまでした」 as you leave.
- g. When you're sick, buy a face mask in order to prevent spreading your sickness to others.
- h. When in doubt, follow the adage—When in Rome, do as the Romans do.

Section 9: Feminine Issues

As the title suggests, there may be a few extra hurdles for women trying to live in Japan. They're not necessarily study-abroad-ruining, but they do present some difficulties which makes them worthy of mentioning.

1. Tampons – Tampons in Japan are largely non-existent or quite expensive. So, you'll either need to bring your own or find another method while in Japan.
2. Standard of Beauty – Japanese women are quite conservative with their clothing.

Wearing conservative clothing is the cultural norm, so any deviations tend to stand out. In the U.S., pushing the norm seems standard to us, but in Japan this is certainly not the case. With that being said, the more you try fitting in with Japanese women with their fashion sense, I think you will have a much more enjoyable experience.

3. Toiletries and Cosmetics – Makeup and toiletries can be difficult to find for American women as they will rarely match your own complexion. Also, makeup products tend to be more expensive in Japan compared to the U.S. Because of that, I'd recommend bringing along your own preferred cosmetics.

Section 10: Leaving Japan and Returning Home

This is undoubtedly one of the most difficult parts of your study abroad experience—returning home. After spending an extended time in Japan, it can be difficult leaving behind your life that you have carved out during your time there.

10.1 Getting Rid of your Bicycle

When you leave Japan, please do not “orphan” your bicycle. One method is taking your bicycle to a bicycle recycling center. These centers can be difficult to find sometimes, but they do exist. In some cases, like mine, I was able to donate my bike to my dormitory. At any rate, expect to fill out some transference-of-ownership forms when you are getting rid of bicycles. Do note, most bicycle shops will not take or buy your bicycle from you. But please, do not just leave your bicycle!

10.2 Getting Plane Tickets

Similar to one of the previous sections, the sooner you look for plane tickets, the better. This can save you hundreds of dollars if you are proactive. Also, if you're returning to Ball State the next semester, be sure to get tickets that will get you home before the next school term starts. Another thing to note, be mindful of your luggage weight. Most airlines will take up to 50 lbs.

worth of luggage, so make sure all your belongings and souvenirs fit in your suitcases. When I was leaving at Narita Airport, I hit the weight limits almost exactly with all my books and souvenirs. If you're struggling to cut luggage weight or find more space in your luggage, I recommend throwing out old clothes, shoes, and toiletries.

10.3 Returning Home

You've returned home, welcome back! Although the idea of being home sounds comforting, expect some difficulties returning to your former American lifestyle. Living in Japan is a life-changing experience—leaving it behind is a saddening thought and experience. But, this is a normal reaction; leaving behind friends, a country you've grown to love, and people you enjoy being around is quite difficult. Almost all former study abroad students experience this, so you are not alone. I myself have had this same experience, and there are a few ways you can alleviate some of these difficulties.

1. Stay in contact with your friends—staying in touch with your Japanese friends is an easy way to at least stay connected. Although you may not be able to physically see them, having some interaction is better than none at all. Your friends will miss you too after you have become a part of their lives as well. Keeping in touch with friends will give you a reason to travel back to Japan and see them. Or, they come see you!
2. Talk to other study abroad students—having shared and similar experiences with other Ball State students in Japan, you may find it helpful to support each other. By reminiscing about your time in Japan, discussing different aspects of Japanese culture versus American culture, or talking about things you miss about Japan, you may find some comfort in talking to someone with similar experiences.

3. Plan your next trip—If your experience in Japan was anything like mine, most likely the question at the top of your head right now is, “When can I go back?” If you can figure out a time, you can at least have a day to look forward to in the future for when you go back, whether it be through the JET program, a Fulbright Scholarship, graduate program, or simply a vacation, knowing that you will go back to Japan in some capacity is a comforting thought.